

2. BACKGROUND

Studies designed to estimate the prevalence or incidence of the maltreatment of non-institutionalized elders, or "elder abuse in domestic settings," have varied considerably in their research methodologies and sources of data. A review of these earlier studies reveals that one or more of the following five sources of data have been used to explore the extent and nature of elder abuse in domestic settings: (1) elderly people receiving services from an agency; (2) professionals and paraprofessionals working with elderly clients; (3) case records or reports of elderly clients prepared by professionals; (4) reports of alleged elder abuse received by Adult Protective Services (APS) or aging agencies; and (5) a probability sample of the elderly taken from the population in a specific geographic location. Study purposes and goals, age and abuse definitions, sample sizes, data-gathering methods, analytic tools, and results and their implications differ from one study to another. Some of these studies attempted to generate national estimates of the prevalence or incidence of domestic elder abuse, while others confined the discussion of results to the population from which data were drawn. The prevalence or incidence of domestic elder abuse estimated by these early studies ranged from one to nearly ten percent of the study sample or of the national elder population.

Gioglio and Blakemore (1982) found that only one percent of the elderly respondents of a random sample of elders in New Jersey were victims of some form of elder abuse. After examining the records of elderly patients served by a Chronic Illness Center in Cleveland, Ohio, Lau and Kosberg (1979) reported that 9.6 percent of 404 patients showed symptoms of abuse. Further, Block and Sinnott (1979) investigated the "battered elder syndrome" in Maryland and found 4.1 percent of the elderly survey respondents were being abused. Other researchers have surveyed or interviewed social workers serving the elderly (Dolon and Blakely, 1989; Douglas, Hickey, and Noel, 1980; O'Malley, Segars, Perez, Mitchell, and Knuepfel, 1979; Sengstock and Liang, 1982) about the abuse of noninstitutionalized elderly. These researchers, however, did not translate their findings into national elder abuse prevalence rates.

Based on a survey of state human service agencies and a review of secondary data, the House Select Committee on Aging (1981) released a statement that "some four percent of the Nation's elderly may be victims of some sort of abuse, ranging from moderate to severe." This estimate suggests that one out of every 25 older Americans, or about one million people in the early 1980s, were abused each year.

In another study conducted by Pillemer and Finkelhor in 1986, one of the main objectives was to generate a national prevalence rate of domestic elder abuse. After conducting interviews with a random

sample of more than 2,000 elderly people in the Boston metropolitan area, these researchers (1988) reported that the prevalence of domestic elder abuse (excluding self-neglect and financial exploitation) was 32 per every 1,000 elders (or 3.2 percent). Using this rate, the researchers calculated an estimated prevalence number of abused elders in the United States, which ranged between 701,000 and 1,093,560.

Tatara (1989, 1990, 1993, Tatara and Blumerman, 1996, and Tatara and Kuzmeskus, 1997) disseminated national elder abuse data, primarily using state statistics for reports of alleged elder abuse. To help states achieve greater compatibility in definitions, reporting methods, and information management practices, Tatara published *Suggested State Guidelines for Gathering and Reporting Domestic Elder Abuse Statistics for Compiling National Data* (1990). Tatara began providing national data on domestic elder abuse about 10 years ago, but has recently analyzed national data on domestic elder abuse for 1995 and 1996 (Tatara and Kuzmeskus, 1997). These data indicated that there were 293,000 reports of domestic elder abuse to state Adult Protective Services in the United States for 1996, a 150 percent increase from the 117,000 reports in 1986, the first year a national estimate of domestic elder abuse reports was calculated.

Although these past studies have contributed to an increased understanding of the nature and extent of the maltreatment of non-institutionalized elders in this country, they were based on relatively small samples and did not provide national estimates of elder abuse incidence. The study described in this report provides, for the first time, national incidence estimates (i.e., new incidents occurring during 1996) of elder abuse that will serve as a baseline for future research in this important area.

2.1 Overview of the Study Design

The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) gathered data on domestic elder abuse and neglect, using standardized definitions and data collection forms, in a nationally representative sample of 20 counties. The standardized abuse and neglect definitions used for the study were developed through the following steps: (1) an analysis of the current state definitions of domestic elder abuse; (2) the convening of roundtables of professionals working with elderly people to gather firsthand information about how domestic elder abuse is detected, reported, and investigated; and (3) the establishment of study definitions of elder abuse by a group of elder abuse experts. The definitions, along with data collection forms, were pilot tested in several local sites before being finalized.

In each sampled county, data were collected from two sources: (1) the local officially designated APS agency or the Area Agency on Aging; and (2) professionals and nonprofessionals, called "sentinels." Using random selection procedures, approximately 1,100 sentinels were chosen from 248 agencies across the 20 sampled counties. The agencies chosen for the study were organizations that regularly work with the elderly (e.g., senior citizen centers and home health care providers), as well as others that serve everyone in the community (e.g., hospitals and clinics, law enforcement agencies, and banks).

Using a specially made video and instructional guide, APS and sentinel reporters were trained to identify elder abuse according to study definitions and specific signs and symptoms and to record data on specially designed forms. Sentinels reported on abuse in each sampled county over a 2-month period on a staggered, 12-month schedule. APS agencies supplied information on all incidents reported to them over comparable time periods. This plan permitted the study to account for possible seasonal affects in the occurrence of elder abuse. Duplicate reports by sentinel agencies and between sentinel agencies and APS agencies were removed to avoid overcounting the true number of incidents. Finally, the unduplicated cases were weighted to arrive at national estimates.

2.2 The Uniqueness of a Sentinel Approach

The method of collecting data used for this study is known as a "sentinel approach." Developed by Westat almost 20 years ago, this Maryland-based survey research company conducted the nation's first child abuse incidence study. The sentinel approach was proposed as an alternative to more costly studies of general population surveys and has been used for all three national incidence studies of child abuse commissioned by the Federal government, with the most recent one completed in 1997. A sentinel approach is based upon the assumption that officially reported cases of abuse represent only the tip of an iceberg and that many more abuse incidents take place in the community. Whatever the reasons, many incidents are not reported to authorities. The supposition that reported cases of child abuse and elder abuse are only the tip of a much larger unidentified and unreported problem is well accepted by both child and elder abuse professionals. Figure 2-1 on the next page depicts the iceberg theory of elder abuse.

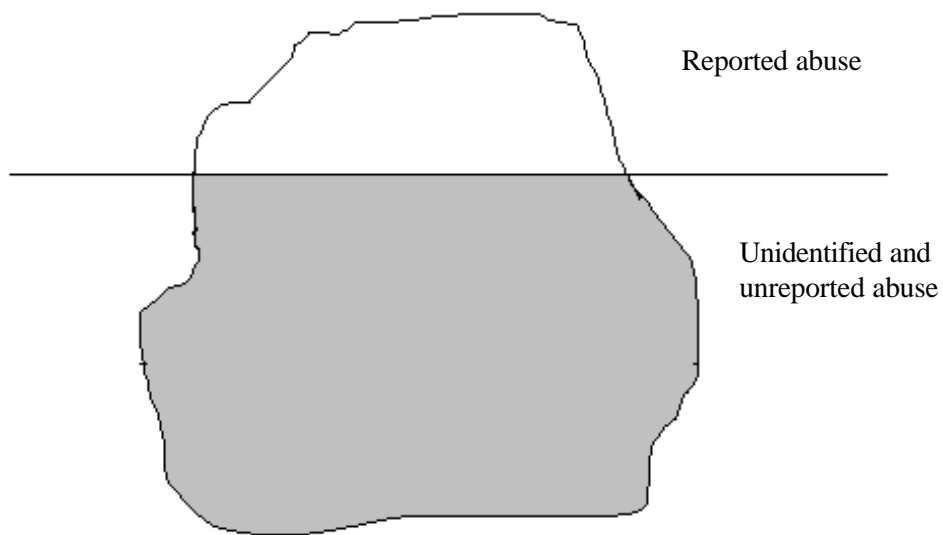


Figure 2-1. Iceberg theory of elder abuse

Using a sentinel approach, better information about unreported abuse can be obtained from individuals who are close to the victims by training them to be on the lookout for abuse incidents. With the strategic use of APS/aging professionals and well-trained sentinels from programs such as visiting nurses, home health care professionals, and hospital emergency room staff, this approach is capable of identifying many domestic elder abuse incidents that would not have been reported previously.